

## **Feature Article**

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# *International and Comparative Adult Education: A German Perspective*

**Jost Reischmann**

### **Introduction**

Traveling abroad or meeting foreigners at home often leads to confusion and misunderstanding. What is true for the everyday experience is also true for the world of academia:

- When I bring a dozen or so of my students from my university in Germany to a conference of the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education (AAACE), my colleagues are surprised. The average age of my German adult education students is about 23. The average age of the American adult education students my colleagues bring to the conference seems to be around 40.
- When somebody wants to know if my students are undergraduate or graduate, I do not know how to answer. In the German higher education system there is no equivalent for that distinction. So I explain: After 13 years of school students then matriculate at the university where they study pedagogy and andragogy for the next four to five years. After that they go out to be valued professionals for the next 40 years.
- “But where are the adult learners?” my American colleagues Trenton Ferro, John Henschke, and others ask me when visiting my university. I am confused. “Why and to what end should adults

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learn at a university and not with their employer or at adult education institutions?”

- Adult educators from a nearby American army base ask me to accept them as doctoral students—and offer to pay me for the doctoral classes. I am scandalized! That they would offer me—a German professor!—money for a planned academic degree feels to me like taking bribes.

All of these examples have one thing in common: They lead to confusion, questions, and the need for more exchange and clarification. We become aware that we have in our mind's concepts of “how things are” (e.g., that, in order to become an adult education professional, you have to be in the second half of life; universities are structured in undergraduate/graduate categories; adults want and have to change their careers by attending universities; education is not a civil right but a commodity available to those who are able to pay), but these concepts that seem “normal” to us suddenly do not help in the international context. This perplexity leads to one of two choices:

1. To laugh about the strange strangers, stick to our concepts, and hope that those strangers will adapt to the “right” (my) way. This choice describes the ethnocentric position, leading—if power and money come into play—to colonization.
2. To become aware that our concepts are not the only “right” concepts in the world and that we are not threatened, but enriched, by understanding foreign concepts. This choice leads to an international and international-comparative understanding.

### **Some Personal “Travelers Tales”—Visiting the USA from Germany**

Without applying “methodological rigor,” I shall report some observations and evaluations based on about 25 visits to the USA in the last 25 years—most of them related to adult education conferences and university visits. In general, I regard adult education, in theory as well as in practice, as not particularly more developed in either Germany or the USA. Not much is known in Germany about adult education in the USA, and the same fits the other way around. At most conferences of AAACE I was the only German, and Americans nearly never show up at German conferences because they don't speak German. When I published the book, *Adult Education in West Germany in Case Studies* (Reischmann, 1988), I discovered with great surprise that this was indeed the first book about

Germany's adult education written in English. It is no surprise that we do not know much about the other country.

In the 1980s there was, for some years, an active exchange between AAACE and the German Volkshochschul Association, DVV, using organized travel groups. Many contacts and friendships date back to that time, but the persons who were active at that time are now 20 years older and retiring. Consequently, these contacts soon will be outgrown, and no young people are following in the footsteps of these pioneers. Instead of more contact, there is less.

From the German perspective this decline can be explained with several reasons. First, there is a content problem: Main topics of American adult education, like Adult Basic Education, ESL, or GED preparation, are marginal in Germany because we do not have these problems. Also different are most of the historical, institutional, and theoretical themes discussed in the USA. Consequently, a German visitor is seldom inspired to attend an American adult education conference on the basis of its content. A similar observation would apply to an American visiting a German conference. This circumstance does not mean that opportunities for learning and insight do not exist, but they are hidden from a first-time visitor. After many years of attendance it is easier for me to know the people, the institutions, the topics, and the titles that allow me to expect inspiration, seriousness, and innovation. The AAACE/DVV exchange program overcame this obstacle and was a great help for beneficial and mutual exchange because topics, questions, and interests were exchanged in advance and made possible a "guided" experience. The International Unit of AAACE offers a similar function with its pre-conference, helping the few foreigners attending not to get lost in the big and confusing main conference. There is also a social problem that foreign visitors often encounter: They are welcomed warmly and publicly in the opening session and everybody shakes hands, but at 8 p.m. the foreign visitor suddenly finds himself standing alone in an empty hotel lobby, and all those who welcomed him have disappeared. Spending the night watching television in the hotel room does not develop much international exchange.

Foreigners also face a financial problem. The international airfare is expensive, fancy conference hotels cost a fortune (and the traveler needs experience to know that the motel across the street costs only one third of that), and, on top of that, the conference fee of \$275 that AAACE charges even for students goes beyond the limits. If this amount continues to be the fee for each of the dozen 24-year-old students who came with me to St. Louis, I will not bring students to the AAACE conference again. A

tentative contact we started with a Turkish university a short time ago illustrates the difference: The whole group was offered a free stay in dormitories, and, spontaneously, a Turkish-German organization offered help with the airfare.

This financial problem is especially difficult when visitors come from countries with soft currency. With shame I remember an AAACE conference shortly after the Iron Curtain fell. A colleague from Czechoslovakia who was an “invited” speaker, was flattered to be one of the handful of foreigners who made it possible to call the conference “international.” He disappeared from the conference after two days because the conference fee and the hotel cost him his income of several months. Conferences in Germany seldom cost more than \$100. “Hosting” a conference is seen as a matter of pride for the local university or organization, which supports the conference from its own budget as an investment in its reputation.

If “looking beyond borders” is desired, then foreign visitors to the USA present an opportunity for international learning to their American hosts. What is flowing back from visitors—and I include my students—is often overlooked. Foreign visitors are not only “takers”; they can also be “givers”—when this opportunity is seen and the hosts are themselves willing to learn.

While contacts with American institutions often cause mixed feelings on the part of foreigners, the person-to-person contacts are mostly much warmer than expected. In the example of the Czechoslovakian colleague, several American colleagues spontaneously offered that he could share their room without paying. I guess German colleagues would not be so openhearted. On this person-to-person level I never met an “ugly American.” I have made a number of wonderful friendships in the USA, and meeting Americans is a delight in general. In hotels or department stores, at tourist attractions, or universities, people were always supportive, friendly, and helpful, especially when they recognized that I was a foreigner. Personal experiences abound—the wonderful family in Utah that hosted my daughter for half a year, the (not forgotten!) “Care packages” families in Germany received after World War II, the chewing-gum we received from the GIs—these and many other good memories will bring me back to the USA at the next chance I get.

Moving to a more systematic argumentation, the “travelers tales” cited above can be read in two different ways. First, there is the content level: The writer is presenting honest impressions, based on personal observations, without methodological rigor, interpreted and generalized against a not-overtly reflective personal background. Secondly, this segment can

be read from a methodological perspective: What type of contribution does this article make to the international discussion? What are the strengths and weaknesses of this type of contribution? This second perspective leads to a more general reflection of the field of “international” and “comparative” adult education.

### Why “International” and “Comparative” Adult Education?

The main focus of *international* adult education is to educate for becoming, and behaving like, a more “international” person, thus leading to more exchange, understanding, and respect on both a personal and national level.

The more narrow and academic concept of *international comparative* adult education (the difference between these two terms will be described below) is justified basically by two central arguments: On a practical level “borrowing” is expected. We attempt, learning from our experiences abroad, to adapt these experiences successfully for our own international practice. Further, we avoid making mistakes and, consequently, do not need to “re-invent the wheel.” On a theoretical level, it is expected that the international comparative perspective helps us to overcome ethnocentric blindness; we learn, prompted by observations made in a foreign context, to perceive and understand better the field of adult education and how it operates in our own country. This understanding of the benefits of international work was pointed out clearly already by Roby Kidd in 1975. International comparative adult education helps us:

- to become better informed about the educational system of other countries,
- to become better informed about the ways in which people in other cultures have carried out certain social functions by means of education,
- to become better informed about the historical roots of certain activities, and thus to develop criteria for assessing contemporary developments and testing possible outcomes,
- to understand better the educational forms and systems operating in one’s own country,
- to satisfy an interest in how human beings live and learn,
- to understand oneself better, and
- to reveal how one’s own cultural biases and personal attributes affect one’s judgment about possible ways of carrying on learning transactions. (Kidd, 1975, p. 7)

In the emerging history of andragogy—the “Wissenschaft” or science of the education and learning of adults—we find a continuous interest in adult education in other countries. In the century between Grundtvig (Denmark) and Freire (Brazil) a number of names and ideas attained international currency. The (English) university extension movement, the (Danish) “Folkehojskole,” the (Swedish) study circle, and the (American) encounter group movement have become models for adult education in many other countries. Often the differences between the “borrowed” and the original have not been perceived. Research shows a lot of cross-cultural communication; an example is the British-Dutch-German relationship in adult education between 1880 and 1930 (Friedenthal-Haase, Hake, & Marriott, 1991). International travel and exchange has, from the early years in the adult education movement, offered many key educators of adults in various countries an important way to shape their international understanding. Lindeman (USA) traveled to Germany, Mansbridge (Great Britain) to Australia and Canada, and Borinski (Germany) to Scandinavia. Even today the “international guild of adult education” can be found at face-to-face meetings held in Ibadan, Ghana (the International Conference on Comparative Adult Education in 1991); Frascati, Italy; Prague, Czechoslovakia (the World Congress of Comparative Education in 1992); Ljubljana, Slovenia (the “Rethinking Adult Education for Development” Conference in 1993); Hamburg, Germany (the CONFINTEA V Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] in 1997); and St. Louis, MO, USA (the International Society for Adult Comparative Education [ISCAE] conference held in conjunction with AAACE and the International Associates of Adult Education in 2002)—just to name a few. As early as 1919, the World Association for Adult Education (WAAE) was founded with the mission “to bring into co-operation and mutual relationship the adult education movements and institutions of the world, in order that peoples may proceed in greater power through wisdom—the mother of all things—to knowledge.”

These highlights indicate that the international argument was, and is, used in the theory of adult education as well as in the practical work carried out in many countries. The effects of the international argument are sometimes evident and lasting; sometimes it remains rhetorical or marginal. Certainly, cultural differences limit the transfer from one country to another. Comparative research, which helps understand the differences and similarities that exist between and among countries and their significance for adult education, clarifies the possibilities and limits of understanding and borrowing. This research is indispensable in a world where

it is necessary to gain an understanding of the various ways adult education is experienced in many countries.

### **Putting Meanings Into Boxes: Definitions**

The definition boxes in this field are not really distinct. There are clearly two different aspects when talking about international work in adult education: a more practical, action-oriented perspective and a more academic, reflection-oriented understanding.

#### ***International Adult Education (A): Practical, Action Oriented***

The more practical, action-oriented understanding of international adult education refers to all activities supporting learning experiences aimed at the connection with other nationalities and culture—within or outside of one's own country. This perspective includes foreign language courses (which make up about one third of the offerings in German adult education centers) and excursions to museums or exhibitions in neighboring countries (which is easy in Germany where, in less than four or five hours by bus—depending on the starting point—Amsterdam, The Netherlands; Paris, France; Zürich, Switzerland; Salzburg, Austria; or Prague, Czechoslovakia can be reached), including walking around, shopping, and a local beer. This understanding also includes educational travel tours to foreign countries.

Sometimes this “looking beyond one's own national borders” is a welcomed byproduct (as in vacation traveling). Sometimes it is explicitly planned. For example, after World War II, the states in Europe supported programs that brought juveniles and young adults together in order to build and decorate war cemeteries in the hope of mutual learning for a better understanding and peace for future generations. The Peace Corps followed a similar idea. City sisterships provide another example. Also, UNESCO and the World Bank are big players in this type of international adult education. By taking my students to a conference in a foreign country, I invest these efforts in the hope of “making them more international.” This goal is accomplished, on the one hand, by learning techniques (developing language skills by, for example, making phone calls and knowing how to find something to eat and a bathroom) and, on the other, by attending to emotions and values (the reduction of stress and feelings of threat and fostering the perception, valuing, and appreciation of “the different”).

Certainly this approach is much easier and more necessary in “old Europe,” where foreign countries, languages, traditions, and historically-

developed hate is, in many places, only minutes or a few hours away. The goal is to overcome the ethnocentricity of national borders. This approach is more difficult on the North American continent, where the United States has just two bordering countries. One of them—Canada—is often not perceived as “foreign”; the other—Mexico—is often perceived as an exotic, developing country and source for a cheap (illegal) workforce not really worth learning from or about. So, in the United States of America, where portions of the population never leave their state, much less their country, gaining international perspectives is much more difficult. Consequently, foreign countries have criticized American political or economic decisions for not having an understanding of international perspective—and not only in the recent past. “Intercultural adult education” is a term that relates closely to this more practical, action-oriented understanding of international adult education. Intercultural education can happen in one country. Here the aims are activities and reflections that serve the understanding and peaceful cooperation among ethnic groups in a society (including the majority in this learning process).

There exist many international organizations in adult education (field of practice) and andragogy (scientific approach), and national associations also have task forces or divisions that deal with international topics. Some of these organizations see themselves as more involved in this practical, action-oriented aspect of “educating adults in international perspectives.” Others—for example, the International Unit of AAACE—reflect a second understanding.

### ***International Adult Education (B): Academic, Reflection Oriented***

This more academic, reflection-oriented perspective will be the focus of the remainder of this paper. This perspective emphasizes gaining knowledge and understanding about adult education in other countries and is accomplished with some methodological rigor. Knowledge about the education of adults in other countries can be gained from various sources.

*0. Travelers tales.* A first source, rated primarily as “pre-scientific,” comprises “travelers tales” — the reports we get from international travelers. An early portion of this article was written on this level. Such reports are delivered mainly by traveling writers or vacationers, but they are also written by scholars who attend a conference abroad and have to report to their funding agency—and publish this report simultaneously in a journal. If these descriptions are more systematic, they are labeled “travelers reports”; if less systematic, “travelers tales.”



These types of international documents are characterized mostly as “subjective-impressionistic.” Their value is considered to be ambivalent. The critical argument is that because of random observation and subjective description, it is not clear how reliable and how representative the descriptions are. On the other hand, the plea is made that, especially because of the subjective focus of eyewitnesses, this type of report might possess a specific strength. In the framework of a new appreciation for qualitative research, these reports may receive renewed interest.

At the scientific level six different types of international/international-comparative research can be identified:

1. *Country reports.* A first stage of international adult education was the country report—as proposed, for example, at the 1966 Exeter Conference: “to identify and describe the existing adult education programs within each country in order to make the relevant data available to scholars in their own and in other countries for comparative analysis” (Charters & Siddiqui, 1989, p. 3). *Country reports* were presented mainly during the 1970s and 1980s. “Adult Education in the Republic of . . .” is a typical title of this type of report. These studies try to describe the system of adult and continuing education in one particular country. They could be written by an author within the country or by a person from the outside. Some of these reports were, and are, rather impressionistic. Others followed a well-developed outline and structure.

2. *Program reports; topic-oriented studies.* During and after the 1980s we find an increasing number of *program reports*. These studies describe foreign adult education programs, institutions, and organizations. Examples of this type can be found in the writing of Charters and Hilton (1989b) or the case studies collected by Knox (1989). Included in this type (which, sometimes, are presented in a separate category) are the *topic-oriented studies* or the *problem approach*; a certain topic or problem is discussed in the context of a nation.

Country reports, as well as topic-oriented studies and the problem approach, are mostly more “international” and less “comparative.” Only one country or program is presented, no comparable object is available. Especially when an author presents his own country or program to a foreign readership in various countries. It is difficult for him to compare with another national system. If, for example, a German author describes a German program in an English publication, should he draw parallels to the English, Scottish, U.S.-American, Canadian, or Australian systems?

The failure to do so leads mostly to the consequence that the readers have to draw the comparative conclusions themselves.

3. *Juxtaposition*. A third type of comparative research is *juxtaposition*. Data from two or more countries are presented. These reports show that in country *A* we can observe *a*, while in country *B* we find *b*. A series of statistical reports represent this type, but no explicit comparison—Where are the similarities? What are the differences?—is given. An example of this type of publication is the German international volume, *Handbuch der Erwachsenenbildung (Handbook of Adult Education, 1978)*, edited by Franz Pöggeler, or Peter Jarvis's (1992) *Perspectives on Adult Education and Training in Europe*. This juxtaposition also can be topic- or problem-oriented when a topic is presented in a series of contributions from various countries. For example, in Pöggeler's (1990) *The State and Adult Education* a series of articles deal with the role of the state in individual countries.

We move now to the “strict” understanding of “international comparative adult education.”

4. *Comparison*. The *comparison* goes one step further; it reports from two or more countries and offers an explicit comparison that attempts to make the similarities and differences understandable. ISCAE uses here the definition of its “founding father,” Alexander N. Charters:

A study in comparative international adult education . . . must include one or more aspects of adult education in two or more countries or regions. Comparative study is not the mere placing side by side of data; . . . such juxtaposition is only the prerequisite for comparison. At the next stage one attempts to identify the similarities and differences between the aspects under study. . . . The real value of comparative study emerges only from . . . the attempt to understand why the differences and similarities occur and what their significance is for adult education in the countries under examination. (Charters & Hilton, 1989a, p. 3)

This type of research can be found, for example, in the final chapter of Charters and Hilton (1989b).

In a narrow understanding country reports and reports about programs or topics in one country are not part of international comparative education. Also juxtaposition—the side-by-side placing of data and descriptions from two or more countries—is not at the stage of comparison.

In this narrow understanding it is necessary that similarities and differences get worked out explicitly with some methodological rigor. While the more general international aspect in adult education has a long tradition, only a small and limited amount of research into adult education has been done comparatively.

5. *Method-reflecting texts.* Finally, field-and-method reflections are seen as a part of international comparative adult education. This category includes reflections about the methods, strategies, and concepts of international comparison, as well as summarizing reports about developments in the international comparative field on a material or meta level. Research methods, problems, and pitfalls were a central focus of ISCAE's first conference and are documented in Reischmann, Bron, and Jelenc (1999).

6. *Reports from international organizations.* A bit outside of this system, but still counted as part of the international tradition, are reports from such transnational institutions as UNESCO, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the World Bank.

What is not given a final answer is the question: Where does "international adult education" end and where does "international comparative adult education" begin? One discrimination seems clear: "Comparison" can only be done when at least two objects are available. So an international comparative study has to refer to at least two countries. Charters and Siddiqui (1989) draw clear limits:

A study that compares two or more aspects of adult education in a single country is merely an instance of intra-national comparative adult education. Similarly, a study that describes one or more dimensions of adult education in two or more countries without comparing them is an example of international adult education, not of comparative adult education. (p. 5)

Following this definition, many presentations and papers and much research should be labeled as more appropriately "international" rather than "comparative." On the other side Collin Titmus (1999), respected British scholar in international comparative adult education, offers a much less strict understanding: "It is generally accepted that most of what is included under the rubric of comparative studies in adult education . . . does not include comparison in the strict sense" (p. 36). The scientific community will have to come to an agreement about this question.

Most researchers in comparative adult education agree that international comparative adult education is at a beginning stage. However, activities, research, conferences, and the existing literature prove that a great deal of clarification already has been done, knowledge is available, and methods are developed. Nevertheless, one central problem seems to be that the continuity of scholarly work is not guaranteed. Only a small number of scholars work in international comparative adult education as their main field. Others enter for only a short period of time or work, and the developed knowledge is scattered around in many places, languages, and times. Having a place and institution where the comparative experience could be collected and stored would help to bring more continuity into the field of comparative adult education. This function was the founding idea of ISCAE.

### **ISCAE: International Society for Comparative Adult Education**

The name of the society sounds impressive, and the fact that the society has a “President” (Jost Reischmann, University of Bamberg, Germany) and a “Secretary” (Marcie Boucouvalas, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, USA) is nearly as impressive as the list of names, functions, and countries of the board members: Michal Bron, Jr., University College of South Stockholm, Sweden; Jindra Kulich, University of British Columbia, Canada; Gretchen Bersch, University of Alaska at Anchorage, USA; and Raja Jayagopal, University of Madras, India. The reality, however, is much more modest. Today ISCAE could best be described as a network of about 110 persons in 35 countries. Members meet at international conferences where they would be participating anyway. There are no statutes and no accounting or membership fee. Copying and mailing of ISCAE communications is divided among three universities from Germany, the USA, and Australia and their respective budgets. Contact becomes much easier through the use of an e-mail list and by accessing ISCAE’s homepage ([www.iscae.org](http://www.iscae.org)) on the World Wide Web. Depending on the vocational workload of the volunteers, it sometimes gets quiet for awhile around ISCAE.

Many colleagues who are working in the field of international and comparative adult education have been added to the ISCAE mailing list for various reasons and occasions. As a result, they become “members.” Perhaps this mailing list is, besides the actual meetings, the most important treasure of ISCAE; it allows immediate access to persons, institu-

tions, and information in many countries. Need information about adult education in Alaska? No problem! Send an e-mail to Gretchen Bersch, University of Alaska at Anchorage. Making a short visit to Ljubljana, Slovenia? Just call Ana Krajnc or Zoran Jelenc, who will be glad to present their work. One of my students was recovering from examination stress in Australia. I gave her the address of Roger Morris. “Yesterday he invited me to attend his class,” she tells me on a postcard. So the terms “network,” “worldwide person-to-person contacts,” and “international research exchange” may best characterize the work of ISCAE today—as well as the term “beginnings,” because we can find in the development and status of ISCAE steps and processes that are typical for the origin of a society.

### **The Purpose of ISCAE**

ISCAE wants to serve the international community by:

- supplying a network of contacts to others interested in comparative adult education,
- fostering exchange through conferences, and
- documenting and sharing developments and standards through publications.

ISCAE tries to promote a narrow focus of its specific task: The focus of ISCAE is to develop, support, and share studies that attempt to identify the similarities and differences of one or more aspects of adult education in two or more countries or regions, trying to understand why the differences and similarities occur and what is their significance for adult education in the countries under examination. Also, ISCAE tries to collect, discuss, and share standards of a methodology for international comparison that might help researchers toward a better understanding of comparison and more sound, reliable, and economic ways of making international comparisons. That intention means that ISCAE invites especially those researchers who are interested in doing comparative work, that is, researching one or more aspects of adult education in two or more countries.

There is a central question: Which standards, principles, and methods of research in comparative adult education already exist and what are they? Further, which pitfalls and problems are known that then, perhaps, can be avoided? There is a very practical idea behind this theoretical part: When new researchers enter the field of comparative adult education—perhaps only for a limited time and a single project—they often

experience similar problems and difficulties because this field of research has not yet developed an internationally shared set of research methods. Although experience and knowledge have been developed for many years, they have not been spread over many places and countries. To avoid re-inventing the wheel—again and again—it is necessary that the knowledge, experiences, discussions, and standards of the “why” and “how” of international comparison gained in many places and languages be brought together and made available so that researchers can refer to and build upon them.

### The “History” of ISCAE

Similar to other adult education initiatives, the name of one person symbolizes the beginning: Alexander N. Charters, professor and Vice-President for Continuing Education, now Professor Emeritus, at Syracuse University, New York, gave birth to the idea of this society and developed it over more than three decades. Peter Jarvis, editor of the reputable “International Perspectives on Adult and Continuing Education” series published by Routledge, assigns this value to Charters’ activities: “Alexander Charters has been in the forefront of international adult education for many years” (Jarvis, 1989, unpaginated).

Alexander Charters’ significant work in international comparative adult education was developed during his tenure at Syracuse. While there Charters helped to establish what now is one of the largest compilations of English-language materials in the field of adult and continuing education. The collection occupies 900 feet of shelf space and contains more than 50 groups of personal papers and organization records—print and non-print material (audio- and videotapes, hundreds of photos) that document the history and development of adult education. For example, the collection includes records of the Adult Education Association from 1924 on, Malcolm Knowles’ papers from 1930 on, and even files for ISCAE. To honor the efforts of Alexander Charters and his wife, Margaret, the collection was renamed in October, 1998, as the “Alexander N. Charters Library of Resources for Educators of Adults.” Many of the milestones of the development of comparative adult education are connected to his name:

1960—At the first world conference of the World Council for Comparative Education in Ottawa, Alexander N. Charters and Roby Kidd, a reputable Canadian scholar of adult education, organized a working group and presented papers about international and comparative adult education.

- 1966—The legendary Exeter Conference took place in New Hampshire. The “Exeter Papers” were published by the Syracuse University Publications in Continuing Education and are still an important historical document today.
- 1970—Alexander Charters organized a series of meetings about comparative adult education at the World Council of Comparative and International Education in Montreal. He published the papers together with Beverly Cassara, then at the University of District of Columbia.
- 1992—Colin Titmus, Great Britain, expert in international and comparative adult education and author of leading publications in this field, chaired a working group of members of this society at the VIII World Council of Comparative Education Societies in Prague.

Until 1992 the society had used the name, Committee for Study and Research in Comparative Adult Education. Alexander Charters, more than 70 years old at the time, urged the members to convey the responsibility for the society to younger scholars. At the 1992 annual conference of the American Association of Adult and Continuing Education, held in Anaheim, CA, a new president and a new secretary were elected, and the society was renamed as the International Society for Comparative Adult Education (ISCAE).

The first conference initiated and organized by ISCAE took place in 1995 in Bamberg, Germany, attended by 31 members from 14 countries. The central focus of this conference was the discussion of the methods, problems, and pitfalls of international comparative research. The second conference, held in 1998 in Radovljica, Slovenia, was attended by 35 members from 16 countries. The third conference took place in St. Louis, MO, in 2002. The intention is to plan conferences every three to four years, in different countries and on different continents, and to sum up the results and experiences in publications (either printed or—as currently proposed—electronically for a world-wide access).

Rapid technological development has made international communication much easier. In the beginning fax, and nowadays e-mail, have sped up this exchange significantly. While e-mail could be used for, perhaps, 10% of the exchanges in preparation for the 1995 ISCAE conference, this amount increased to more than 80% for the 1998 conference. The book that documents the results of the first two ISCAE conferences, involving editors in three countries, could be prepared in the allotted time only with

the help of e-mail. ISCAE's website and e-mail list provide opportunities for documentation and contact that might, in the future, help researchers worldwide refer to the "state of the art" in international comparative adult education.

However, technology is only one part of the international exchange. ISCAE offers a person at the other end of a telephone call or e-mail message. Furthermore, it offers a chance not only to maintain virtual contact but also to meet face-to-face. The latter is the purpose of the ISCAE conferences and the meetings of ISCAE members at other international conferences. These person-to-person contacts are very rewarding. People working in the international field are fairly easy to accommodate (e.g., as guests in your home), are curious and tolerant (otherwise they would not be in that field), are enriched by their fantasy, offer humility and hospitality, and have an open approach to people. These characteristics open doors, especially in the international context.

Another attitude can be learned in this international exchange: not to see things too narrowly. ISCAE tries to focus on "real" international comparison, therefore reports such as "Adult Education in the Republic of X" should not be presented at ISCAE meetings. Nevertheless, the "tries" and "shoulds" indicate that the reality sometimes is different. Although the "narrow" definition of comparison has been cited in the "Call for Papers," some country and program reports have been presented as well. Should we reject the papers of colleagues who traveled half way around the world and needed an accepted paper to get funding for attending the conference?

The hope is that ISCAE's conferences and publications will become increasingly the place where the researchers in comparative adult education will be able to focus and concentrate on discussing, documenting, and exchanging their accumulating body of knowledge. The accrued value is both professional and personal: easier access to comparative knowledge; deeper understanding of "how things are" and "how things could be"; and a tolerant, flexible, and open attitude.

### **The Difficulties of International Research and Volunteering in an International Society**

It certainly is challenging and rewarding to get a wider view of our world through an international orientation, but there are also handicaps that make this work difficult. Just three of them are named here.

A first handicap is *language*. International communication takes place in English. For the majority of the world this is a foreign language. Com-



municating—even more, publishing—in this foreign language takes a great deal more effort than does doing research in one's native context. This handicap is manifested in a variety of settings:

- Native English speakers are always faster during discussions.
- Secretaries are often not trained to write English. So the researcher has to type everything himself: notes, minutes of meetings, letters, manuscripts, questionnaires, and the like.
- When publishing, a native English speaker always has to be found for editing. Trenton Ferro, editor of this article, can verify what that means!
- Institutions, laws, and political or cultural background are often so different that it is difficult to find an appropriate translation.
- When making citations, the English literature often is not available in foreign libraries.
- It makes no sense to refer to the knowledge and experience of non-English research literature because the latter does not exist for the international readership. Consequently, people from non-English countries, when working in the international context, lose most of their research background—theory, methodology, and content—that is based on their native-language.

Another handicap is the difficulty in maintaining regular attendance at central international meetings. Person-to-person contacts are absolutely essential in this field. To enter this field and to stay in its network is nearly impossible without traveling and being visible. This visibility requires a considerable investment of time, energy, and money, and this investment has to be made also in times when no comparative project is being carried out and no extra project money is available. In my experience through ISCAE I know that most conference participants attend on their own money, sometimes with some very limited support from their university or foundations. (I always was happy when 30% of my total expenses were paid by the university; usually it was much less). Such expenditure makes it especially difficult for young scholars to come into the field of international comparative adult education or to stay in it after a comparative project is finished.

Of course, international comparative projects have much higher costs and a lot more problems than research carried out in one country. A foreign partner has to be found and has to be convinced to join a project. Many details have to be clarified before and during the research process and at the end for the publication. Such discussion requires continuous

exchange. In most cases one partner also carries an extra load of translation when the other partner does not speak his language. It is difficult to find foundations willing to support international projects. National foundations often are not interested in paying the costs of the foreign partner. Even when one researcher is able to travel to two or more countries and thus avoid the handicap of co-authorship, comparative research means a high investment of money, time, and effort. When weighing the potential outcome of these investments for one's career, a scholar often finds it more beneficial to work at the national level. Funding agencies should do more not just to assist international comparative research projects but especially to encourage and finance the possibility of bringing young scholars into this field. Also, ways should be found to support those volunteering in international societies.

### Prospects

International adult education and international comparative adult education share the fate of many good ideas: Everybody agrees that they are important, but not many are willing to take the load of the international work on their shoulders and purses. Experiences in international and international comparative adult education have been developed with many countries for some 70 years in Europe and 40 years in the USA. The important task is to encourage continued work in this field, building on previous results in order to develop these experiences further.

More international knowledge, respect, and understanding certainly are needed in today's world. In smaller countries these ideals can be reached more easily through everyday experiences. For the United States of America, a big country spanning an entire continent and having armed forces, business presence, and cultural influence all over the world, this is a much more difficult task. The personal benefits of being a more "international" person include understanding, open mindedness, tolerance, and humility—and good times with good friends in many places in the world (for example, in a *Biergarten* during the summer in Bamberg, Germany).

From a global perspective, learning from each other is an essential, basic necessity. The UNESCO *Hamburg Declaration on Adult Education* (1997) put this perspective in words: "One of the foremost challenges of our age is . . . to construct a culture of peace based on justice and tolerance within which dialogue, mutual recognition and negotiation will replace violence, in homes and countries, within nations and between countries" (Chapter 14).

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